

Corporate Identity: It's More Than a Logo

by Carol Septow

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Let's say you're the marketing director of a professional services firm, the director of corporate communications, or the company president. You know you're good at what you do and that your company provides outstanding services. What's troubling you is the dissonance between these outstanding services and the level of corporate marketing collateral and the web site. You're worried that marketing communications are sending mixed messages and thwarting business development efforts. In fact, corporate literature design has become a reactive process, often driven by the need for a piece for an upcoming event. With clients and prospects savvier than ever, you're concerned that the right image for business has not been created.

Creating image is the job of a visual identity system. It is the result of the integration of business goals and creative design. It defines the use of typography, image, color, layout and logo to reflect your business, making

certain that all communications send a singular message. A system will provide the underlying architecture for all external and internal communications, ensuring a consistent presentation from corporate literature design to signage.

MUSICAL CHAIRS

Creating a visual identity is a process that begins by switching seats with clients and prospects to view your business from their perspective. As seen from your former seat, the variety of ways to interact with your business can look like a series of unrelated events. On the surface there doesn't appear to be a relationship between corporate collateral, public relations initiatives, interior office space design, and the web site. To an individual client or prospect though, these internal and external touchpoints combine to create a single picture of your business. More than passing impressions, these imprints become one's collective 'Experience' of your business. There

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is no official port of entry into this world. Where someone may enter your sphere cannot, and should not, be controlled. Having many points of entry is optimum. Therefore, it is crucial that the Experience be consistent from portal to portal. Clients and prospects will find it confusing if different encounters send different messages about your firm. The danger to business is that your Experience is spinning without thoughtful input, creating a hodge-podge world of mixed messages and images, all featuring the corporate logo.

Let's apply this Experience principle to corporate literature design. In this scenario, you're the marketing director of a mid-sized law firm. Each of your firm's clients works with a multi-disciplinary team of attorneys who solve a variety of legal needs across a spectrum of issues. This forward-thinking structure is the unique factor that distinguishes your firm from among the top 10 in your city. Is it enough to state this in the firm brochure or in each practice area brochure? What type of design approach would visually reinforce that message to a prospect looking for a firm of conservative risk-takers? If the content says conservative risk-takers, but the presentation says only conservative, dissonance has been created. If the content says creative and forward-thinking, but the presentation says stodgy, or, if the content says high

level of expertise and the presentation says low production values, message and presentation are not aligned.

Design and message need to reinforce one another. A seamless integration of content and presentation is a winning combination. Anything less will result in confused prospects.

WHO ARE YOU?

What Experience do you want to create for clients and prospects? The answer to this question begins with a definition of your business. This groundwork needs to be in place before a designer can determine how anything may look. Many professionals find the following questions a good place to begin:

- who are our key clients, existing and targeted;
- what are their major concerns and issues;
- what skills, resources, strengths, experiences do we have that will address these concerns;
- what do we want clients/prospects to know about us (exclude the obvious: we have a combined 100 years of experience; we provide fresh, creative solutions; we provide top-notch support and follow-through; we listen to our clients...);
- which clients/industries make up the largest portion of business now; how do we want that to change;

Messages like ‘we have 100 years of experience’ or ‘we understand’ will not resonate like messages that mirror a situation that a client or prospect is facing.

- how would clients describe us;
- is there a discrepancy between how the company is perceived in the market and how we perceive ourselves;
- is there a discrepancy between current perception and how the business looks to us in 5 years;
- what messages about the company, positive and negative, are being delivered by current corporate literature design?

Try thinking of the business as a ‘who’ rather than an ‘it’ and sketch a personality. Start with obvious adjectives (casual, formal, friendly, quiet) to get them out of the way, allowing for more idiosyncratic and differentiating descriptions to emerge. Anything goes during this stage of the process. Leave the editing for later.

Honest and thoughtful answers will drill below the surface, where unique ideas are born. A definition of your company will emerge that truly distinguishes it and its Experience. All creative decisions to come will support this definition as a designer translates it into a visual statement. When linked with business goals and objectives, these creative decisions become strategic rather than capricious. For example, a monochromatic color palette will send a different message than one that features bright, primary colors. Additionally, just because your

computer system has 200 fonts, doesn’t mean it makes sense to use them all. Depending on the messages to be supported, a family of traditional fonts may be selected over those that are contemporary. Or a sophisticated combination of traditional and cutting edge typestyles may make the best visual statement. What about imagery? Would it be better to use photos or would illustrations best reflect the message? Architecture firms often prefer large site photos and minimal copy, allowing the work to speak for itself. In this scenario a flexible layout grid would need to be created to accommodate a variety of projects. Creative options are endless; consistency is the key.

As a dynamic entity, the Experience must be defined with care given to the messages it will deliver and the type of responses they must generate. Provide value by crafting content that illustrates your working knowledge of the major issues for clients and prospects. While it is good to know that a company has many years of experience, these ‘we’ messages, (we have 100 years of experience, we have won many awards, we understand) will not resonate like messages that mirror a situation that a client or prospect is facing. The former is a monologue, the latter mimics a dialogue by demonstrating knowledge of issues,

understanding of consequences, and an ability to envision and craft solutions.

The same principle applies to web site design and content. Several years ago there was widespread panic to get a web site 'out there.' Many companies did just that: got something out there. They mistook action for progress. Today these sites are being gutted because they cost a lot and generated little. Listing resumé content is acceptable, but shouldn't drive the site design. It creates a monologue where there should be dialogue. Visitors to the site must be able to pick up their issue thread on the home page. A web site is not confined by binding or page count. Take advantage of the medium to let prospects easily find what they are looking for. This is how to avoid creating a digital brochure. Refer back to the definition exercise and review your list of client issues. Demonstrate to users that not only do those of us at Our Company understand these issues, we have anticipated questions and furnished answers, so please click here. This provides real value, imparting working knowledge that can make the site a reference point.

MAYBE LATER

This process of defining the Experience, the business, and visual identity is a difficult exercise. It lends itself to procrastination and excuse-making.

Do any of the following sound familiar?

- We're too busy to deal with this now.
- I don't have the budget to do this.
- We know we should do this, but we've decided to give it another year to see where business goes first.

If you find yourself thinking that you're too busy, remember that identity is all about perception. At the same time that you and your staff are hard at work, corporate collateral is working too, creating an Experience of your company for people you may never have met, who may be working for firms you've never heard of, or ones you've been trying to get into. Communications that align with the Experience will support your efforts and strengthen business. A disconnect will generate headaches that will make their way to the top of your to-do list.

Budget is an ongoing concern. Time and money were invested in those one-off pieces created for that upcoming event. A system will eliminate costs incurred reinventing the design decision wheel. Laying a strong visual foundation first and adding components (literature program, web site, advertising, etc.) in phases will ensure that the pieces developed today will work with those added next year. Each addition to the system, even if it is for a one-time event, will add equity to the logo and support name recognition efforts.

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If you want to give it all a little more time, ask yourself why. As temporary solutions, existing communications will be out of alignment with your Experience and confusing to prospects and clients. The marketplace is moving too fast to lose position through confusion. During that same timeframe an identity could begin to develop a presence, planting seeds for the future. Because it is about perception and capturing the essence of the Experience, a visual identity will provide a solid foundation for expansion. The strokes are broad enough to accommodate transitions

and adjustments. Imagine the system as a structure: too narrow in its vision and it will be quickly outgrown.

Everyone is clamoring for the attention of clients and prospects. Noise in the marketplace is loud. With a visual identity that has thrown your company's Experience out of alignment, its voice is unable to strike the clear and resonant chord that will rise above the din. Intelligent design will bring a quiet symmetry to the Experience that will be clearly audible. ■

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